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ABSTRACT

This resource explores how mutual friendships and diversity of social contacts influence literacy learning (such as in reading and writing workshops) in the primary grades. The strengths of friends working together seem to be a function of the cycle of conflict, resolution, and reflection that occurs. This cognitive decentering and the metalanguage that accompanies it is also facilitated by diverse social contacts. Collaborative literacy learning experiences, with friends and with diverse others, support the reflective talk that promotes literacy learning. Contains 12 references. (Author/RS)

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Abstract. *This resource explores how mutual friendships and diversity of social contacts influence literacy learning in the primary grades. The strengths of friends working together seem to be a function of the cycle of conflict, resolution, and reflection that occurs. This cognitive decentering and the metalanguage that accompanies it is also facilitated by diverse social contacts. Collaborative literacy learning experiences, with friends and with diverse others, support the reflective talk that promotes literacy learning.*

In classrooms in which reading and writing are taught through a workshop approach, it is common to see groups or pairs of children working together. Indeed, it is impossible to implement a workshop without collaboration among children. The beneficial effects of this collaboration have been widely reported in journals and books (see, for example, Dyson, 1989, 1993; Lensmire, 1994), and classrooms have been transformed from individual desks-in-a-row to clusters of desks that invite collaboration. We are just beginning, however, to look closely at peer relationships in literacy events to see exactly how and why peer collaboration promotes literacy learning. The question is, what kind of peer relationship is most beneficial to literacy learning? The answer seems to be that mutual friends working together is one of the most effective groupings for literacy learning; although contact with a diverse group is also important, both at home and at school. We shall explore how mutual friendships and diversity of contacts influence literacy learning in the primary grades.

What are Mutual Friends?

How can you tell if children are mutual friends? Mutual friends are children who have named each other as friends. If you want to find out who the mutual friends in your classroom are, collect pictures of each child. Then, individually, ask each child in your classroom to go through the pictures and to show you who his or her friends are (you might ask for three names). It is important to have the pictures with you, especially at the beginning of the year, so that your students think about everyone in the classroom. After you have interviewed all of your students, compare the "friendship nominations" of each. Those students who have named each other as friends are "mutual" friends. For example, if Anna says that Jessica, Amanda, and Maria are her friends, and Maria says that Anna, Lori, and Keena are her friends, then Anna and Maria are mutual friends. Once you have this data, you can pair children so that they are working with mutual friends on some of the literacy tasks in the classroom.

Why Do Mutual Friendships Support Learning?

Cognitive development, including literacy learning, is influenced by the emotional climate surrounding learning (Brown, Bransford, Ferrara & Campione, 1983). Close, mutual relationships with friends are often characterized by an emotional climate that supports cognitive development (Dunn, 1988). The high level of trust between friends means that friends are more willing to disagree with each other *and* more inclined to resolve their disagreements. The cycle of conflict and resolution that is supported by mutual friendships spurs development (Piaget, 1977).

This disagreement and compromise occur through talk. Conceptual conflict and compromise are emotionally charged events for young children (Dunn, 1988), events that are often characterized by children verbally encoding accompanying emotional states with terms such as happy, sad, disappointed, angry. Encoding emotional states in language has the effect of "cooling" the emotions to a level where children can then reflect upon them (Dunn, 1988). That is, by talking about the emotions that accompany conceptual conflict and resolution, children make

them emotionally less charged and can thereby step back from the interaction and reflect. This reflective process is crucial for children's reflection upon language and thought processes, which, in turn, facilitates literacy.

Friends, compared to acquaintances, tend to have more conflicts and resolutions, yet they are also more cooperative and sustained (Hartup, 1996), and contain more comments about how they are thinking and feeling. The cognitive decentering that friendship pairs demonstrate supports learning.

How Does This Relate to Literacy Learning?

In a study of first-grade children's computer-assisted writing, Jones and Pellegrini (in press) found that friends, compared to nonfriends, not only commented more about how they were thinking and feeling, but they also wrote more sophisticated narratives. Similarly, with a group of older primary school children, Daiute and colleagues (Daiute, Hartup, Shool, & Zajac, 1993) found that the oral language accompanying narrative writing and the written narratives themselves were more advanced in friendship, compared to acquaintance, pairs. In a study of kindergarten children reading, writing, and playing in friendship and acquaintance pairs, Pellegrini and Galda (1996) found that friends generated more talk about emotions, language, and thinking than did acquaintances. This kind of reflective talk, especially talk about language, was related to their literacy development.

Why Does This Talk Between Friends Promote Literacy?

In the early grades, reading and writing status is reliably predicted by children's ability to orally reflect on the language and mental processes involved in literacy (Adams, 1990; Pellegrini & Galda, 1991). Children's talk, and their use of "meta" terms such as "feel," "think," and "read" is supported in friendship pairs more than acquaintance pairs because of the mutual trust. Trust means that children can take risks, and work at the edge of their ability which leads to growth in literacy.

Should We Always Group Friends Together?

Of course there are other social configurations that are important in literacy learning in classrooms. Whole-class groups and small groups have and will continue to support literacy development in ways that friendship pairs cannot. Just as friendship is an important context for children's literacy development, diverse relationships are also important. Children who have diverse social contacts with both adults and peers, at home and at school, also engage in more "meta" talk regarding literacy than do those who do not have diverse contacts, and in more cognitive decentering, or perspective taking.

Do Friendships Change Across the School Year?

Certainly, friendships change across time. It is always apparent when close friends have had a disagreement that they have not resolved! It is also the case that children who work together in a collaborative classroom often become friends over time; so taking care to form mutual friendship pairs may be more important at the beginning of the year, when children are new to each other, than it is at the end of the year when most of the children in the class would be mutual friends.

What Events and Routines Support Collaborative Literacy Learning?

Establishing a supportive community of friends is essential. Whole-class activities, such as

sharing time, can be an important time for demonstrating to your students just how much you value the experiences and ideas they bring with them. By acknowledging and explicitly supporting their ideas during sharing time, you demonstrate that everyone in the classroom is an important resource.

Working in pairs with mutual friends or in small groups that change over time to increase diversity of contacts provides children opportunities to talk about feelings, language, and thinking and to reflect on these processes. Demonstrating how you reflect on these topics lets children know that they, too, can reflect through talk with others. You can promote this kind of talk through buddy reading, writing with a partner, forming groups of children that help each other with writing, forming reading response groups, and the like. In the early grades, having the opportunity for dramatic play is also important as that, too, generates reflective talk.

It is also important to remember that conceptual conflicts—if they are resolved—are opportunities for learning. Hearing others' ideas and working through others' suggestions provides the kind of conceptual conflict that promotes cognitive growth. Whole-class experiences such as book discussions, in which you entertain various ideas and explore similarities and differences in response, help students learn how to handle conceptual conflict in small group or pair situations.

Once They're Talking, What Do I Do?

Observations of children working together will help you keep track of what and how they are doing. Listen for words that describe feelings, language and language processes, and thinking and thinking processes. Listen for conflicts and resolutions. When you hear your students engaging in reflective talk, you will know they are about the business of literacy learning.

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